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MOLIÈRE'S EXPOSITION OF A COURTLY CHARACTER IN *DON JUAN*

Among the numerous and varying analyses of one of Molière's most interesting characters—that of Don Juan—there may be room for a treatment which attempts to emphasize both the unity of that character in the course of its exposition and development throughout the play and its relation to a courtly standard of conduct well known in the milieu wherein the play was first produced.

I

Molière's setting forth of the character of his hero may be considered a development and elucidation of the theme announced in the very first scene by Sganarelle—"Un grand seigneur méchant homme est une terrible chose." The servant is in fact commenting not on the general character of his master, but on the dreadful fascination which that character exerts upon the mind of the valet, compelling him to acquiesce in deeds against which his soul rises in revolt. None the less, the remark serves well as a text for the play as a whole.

The development of Don Juan's character in the play—for such a development there plainly is—is divided into two parts by the moment of his mock conversion, and organized analysis demands the separate treatment of the two periods. In the first, then, the actions and opinions of Don Juan are those of a gentleman of the first rank, who is, however, given over to the pursuit of one end—the satisfaction of passion. The less any one of his traits is concerned with the attainment of that end, the more nearly it approximates to a part of the normal character of the ideal gentleman; but every trait of such a character which interferes with the success of the moving impulse is thereby rigorously crushed out. Don Juan is courageous—witness: his readiness to approach the town where he has lately killed the Commandeur; his swift aid to Don Carlos against the robbers; his readiness to defend himself upon the arrival

of Don Alonse and his party—even his disdainful refusal to conceal his identity contributes to the character; his readiness to give Don Carlos satisfaction in duel; his behavior in the presence of the specter; and his calm demeanor in the three encounters with the statue. Even the disguise of Don Juan and Sganarelle is explicitly justified by the hero as a ruse against an overwhelming force. I am inclined to credit him with the virtue of generosity in the incident of the begging recluse of the forest; for although the man stoutly refuses to swear despite the offered bribe, Don Juan finally tosses it to him “for the love of”—not “God,” as the natural phrase runs, but “humanity.” Why this troublesome expression ever appeared in the play is a matter of discussion;¹ Don Juan’s regard for humanity is a minus quantity throughout. The strongest suggestion, where none are very strong, appears to be to the effect that Don Juan turned the end of the formula through a desire—while omitting the mention of God—to use a word of rather general ideal meaning. It is possible that a survey of the plays or verse of the time might discover some rhetorical tag end of phrase or line well enough known to be called to the mind of Molière’s audience by the present expression; but that is a long shot, and the only evident thing is that the occasion was one of generosity on the speaker’s part. Urbanity of address and manner characterize this *grand seigneur* as they do the normal gentleman: “ce bon Gusman,” the recluse, M. Dimanche and Don Louis receive courteous treatment, although in the last case to be sure the undercurrent of insolence in Don Juan’s manner belies his words.

There are of course two episodes wherein the behavior of Don Juan is not consonant with the character of the *grand seigneur*: the scene of the squabble with Pierrot, and that of the fruitless visit of M. Dimanche. But it is noteworthy that these scenes were so to speak forced upon the dramatist by the conditions under which he was writing his play. He had a comedy to compose on short notice from material more or less ready to hand in Spanish and French

¹ Cf. for example, C. Magnin, “Le Don Juan de Molière,” in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, (1er février, 1847), pp. 425 ff.; J. Janin, *Critiques dramatiques, La comédie*, Tome I, p. 120; *Œuvres de Molière* (ed. Société des anciens textes français) 1880, Tome V, pp. 146 ff.; ed. Moland, 1885, Tome I, p. 233, Tome VI, p. 363. Among lexicons v. Hatzfeld-Darmesteter-Thomas, Génin, Livet, and lexicon at the end of the edition of the Société des anciens textes français, all s.v. *humanité*.

plays and in the Italian *commedie dell'arte*; scenes of the type here mentioned—of the comic countryman and the anxious tradesman cozened by the hero—were no unusual devices for creating laughs. Moreover, it is to be observed that, as Gendarme de Bévotte¹ has pointed out, contempt for creditors was a foible of contemporary high life current enough to require castigation by such men as Bossuet, Bourdaloue, and Fénelon. Now take away or emasculate these two scenes of comic action and the only one remaining appears in the dinner which Don Juan shares with Sganarelle, and to which the statue brings such a sudden ending. Incidentally, this juxtaposition of the farcical and the terrible suggests with some force Shakspeare's frequent device for heightening tragic effects; but Molière is following an Italian source with considerable fidelity. So then it appears that the structural importance of the two scenes mentioned may be discounted so far as they diminish the unity of the character-drawing, which shows a nobleman possessing the natural and developed qualities which contribute toward a complete character, save that in so far as those qualities touch the one pursuit which masters him they are warped and turned to the service, not so much of the man as of his passion.

How, then, does this passion of Don Juan affect the details of his character? To deal with this question it is necessary first to point out the fundamental negation upon which Don Juan rests the fabric of his belief and behavior. He denies the authority over his actions of God and of mankind alike. Now a dramatist might during the Renaissance in its earlier stages have built up the character of a hero based on his relations with his fellow-men, while refusing to consider the religious sanctions as bearing on ideal conduct. Neither Aristotle nor Castiglione had referred to religion to support their structures of the great-souled man and of the courtier. But in the atmosphere of later comedy—as contrasted with the refined and formalized classicism of tragedy—the picture of a man who could defy not only the social but the religious convictions of his milieu had a redoubled emphasis.

So we have the man who admits of no authority, whether human or divine, to control him. Here, however, there is no spring of

¹ *La légende de Don Juan ...* Paris (Hachette), 1906, p. 218.

action, but merely a foundation for any possible exertion of unbridled will. The spring of action appears in the passion for women which Sganarelle at the opening of the play describes from the world's point of view, and whose philosophy Don Juan expounds in turn to Sganarelle. The play begins by discovering the hero in flight from his wife and planning the abduction of a young woman toward whom his sudden fancy has turned; failing through the interposition of a storm (query: Is Providence showing itself here for the edification and comfort of the bourgeois-minded? Indeed, it is noteworthy that Molière, in strict conformity to classic rule, permits no acts of violence upon the stage throughout the play), he at once makes heated and complicated love to two country girls, first in succession and then together, attacking the fiancé of one, a bumpkin who has but lately rescued him from drowning; warned to flee from his wife's brothers, he falls in with them, and although protected for a time by one against the other, he eventually arranges for single combat with his protector. Meanwhile he has rejected first his wife's request for reconciliation and next her urgent entreaty that he avoid impending doom by reform, and has manifested the coolest disregard of his father's reproofs and admonitions. His governing passion, then, untrammelled by any admission of authority, results in the loss of the qualities of fidelity to the pledged word, of gratitude, and of that filial respect which is prescribed by both the religious and the social code. Possibly the greatest falling away from the ideals of the gentleman lies in the very fact that Don Juan permits any one impulse to outweigh and debase all the rest, reason and balance thus abdicating their rule.

The passion which animates Don Juan is, it will be observed, the excessive development of a desire that in itself, under Gassendi's classification,¹ is non-necessary, but harmless because natural. The horror of Don Juan's position is that of a perverted *nature*, not of a purely inhuman touch of character. Don Juan himself, incidentally, ascribes to nature the course which his actions take: in refusing to any object of his love a perpetual lien on his constancy, he says plainly: "Je rends à chacune les hommages et les tributs où la nature nous oblige." But even the natural desire has burned itself

¹ *Petri Gassendi ... Operum Tom. II* (ed. Lyon, 1658), p. 493.

out before Don Juan's punishment reaches him; there emerges in its stead a trait of wanton cruelty toward his victims—a sadistic corruption which marks the complete debasement of the human impulse. It is the stimulus of seeing another's happiness which urges him to plan the abduction of that fiancée of whom in the first act he is in pursuit; and again it is only when Elvire appears before him for the last time—when she has renounced her relations with him and has so to speak returned to the protection of that religious status from which he originally enticed her—that his jaded fancy is attracted by her obvious agony of spirit. It is no recognition of Elvire's anxiety for his welfare that moves Don Juan here to suggest her remaining with him, but the reawakening of an appetite dulled by continual abuse. What was at first the motive principle of the character ends by destroying itself.

So far, then, there appears the consistent character of a gentleman, warped by the excessive development of an impulse which renders him openly unscrupulous in any action subserving his purpose. This consistency and this brazenness of manner deserve special attention, for they render significant the great turning-point of the play, which is Don Juan's conversion. Up to this point his nature has been not so much developing before the eyes of the audience as showing successively its traits as they appear in the light of the compelling passion. The connoisseurs of character in the court might still have some approval—as indeed it is recorded that many courtiers did at the time of the presentation—for this virile and open manifestation of will. The character is still sound and coherent according to the norm of the time, derived in essence from Aristotle's exposition. Now comes the conversion—and before Don Juan can profit by it there comes the punishment of Heaven. This punishment is by no means to be taken as simply the well-earned reprisal for a series of sins, all of the same kind—seduction, murder, filial impiety, open and flagrant breaches of human and divine law. Don Juan's conversion is a new departure *in essence*, a change of the category of wickedness; no longer defying social and religious authority, he pretends to accept it, in order to reap the benefits of an assumed reform under the cloak of which he is to continue his misdeeds. This action is of course the equivalent of turning the laws of God and of

man to serve the sinner; and the dignity of those laws is maintained by the catastrophe which ends the play. It is noteworthy that Don Juan by his metamorphosis succeeds in outraging not only the ideals of the bourgeoisie, by his affront to human and divine authority, but also to some extent the tenets of the gentlefolk as well, who may have cared little enough for the sanctions of God regarding human conduct, but preserved the feeling that a strong character must be at least consistent. Don Juan has deserted from the ranks of gentlemen; his character has broken down; he is no longer a figure, but a poor dissembling scoundrel. He has by his *péripétie* forfeited the regard of Heaven, of moralist, and of courtier, and may be abandoned to his deserved punishment.

Now when does the idea of conversion come to Don Juan, and how does it take form? The first interview with Elvire shows him adopting the motive of conscience to mask ironically his desertion of her. In the fourth act, after Elvire has left him for the last time, he suggests to his servant: "Sganarelle, il faut songer à s'amender pourtant"; and on Sganarelle's enthusiastic acquiescence he turns off the matter: "Oui, ma foi, il faut s'amender. Encore vingt ou trente ans de cette vie-ci, et nous songerons à nous." The end is ironic, but the whole remark may well be designed to suggest on what subject Don Juan's mind is engaged, for on the following day he announces to his father his conversion and repentance. Moreover, from the very opening of the play the persons who undertake to remonstrate with him constantly adjure him in the name of Heaven—Sganarelle in his first conversation with his master, Elvire on her appearance,¹ Sganarelle again in the flight through the forest, the recluse, Sganarelle after the invitation to the statue, Don Louis in his first meeting with his son, Elvire when she returns to warn Don Juan to flee from the wrath to come—all reiterate the expression "le ciel" to exemplify the judge and punisher of human conduct. Now after hearing the word used by all the supporters of human and divine law, Don Juan upon his conversion has the formula ready for use, and tries it successfully in the interview with his father; while of the nine speeches made to Don Carlos—the next person

¹ Here it is to be noticed that Don Juan marks her use of the word by an aside to Sganarelle.

save Sganarelle to whom Don Juan speaks—eight are merely appeals to "le ciel" to justify the course Don Juan has taken.

Thus the dramatist has shown the degeneration of the *grand seigneur*. Don Juan's single passion, itself simply an excess of a normal desire, first bends his whole character to its purpose; eventually becoming itself submerged, it leads him to abrogate his last and greatest claim—he is no longer even a magnificent scoundrel. The character develops in the course of the action, and is not merely shown in successive details. The final sin is no simple addition to the list, but is an innovation in kind, and almost necessarily draws the punishment of Heaven upon the offender.

II

Now what is the background against which the dramatist throws up this character in such sombre relief? Public opinion, social and religious, expressed by three chief characters—Sganarelle, Elvire, and Don Louis. None of these three, however, must be taken to be merely the vehicle for such an expression—the convention of the morality-play and the farce has been left behind, and the three characters grow during the course of the action.

Sganarelle represents the normal judgment of bourgeois society; the touchstones of his creed are heaven, hell, and the *loup-garou*, and he knows that his master's course is wrong even though he cannot prove it by art-logick against the pure atheist and scorner of human sanctions. The disapproval which Sganarelle feels for Don Juan's procedure is so strong that he permits himself plain words upon it to his master himself, and at times attempts to warn the victims; yet the service of that master has such a claim upon his loyalty that Sganarelle, protesting and trembling, none the less follows him to the end. The arguments which Sganarelle finds to use in his championship of morality are naturally of no avail against the utter unbeliever, whether the amateur theologian appeals to the *moine bourru* or to the patent aetiology of the universe. The latter point, by the way, is precisely the basis so frequently offered by Voltaire for his belief in God: there is a complicated machine, the world; someone must have made it.

Elvire, besides the personal appeal of her position, concentrates the claim of divine law to the obedience of Don Juan; the foundation of her character is the religious basis which her convent has instilled, and the combined devotion to Heaven and to the man who has betrayed her makes her a figure of no ordinary strength.

In Don Louis appear the ideals of the head of a noble family, and to some degree consequently the tenets of that court before which the play was first performed. Don Louis' address to his son is a development of the text "noblesse oblige" in a lofty and forceful style, urging the conception of family honor against the infamous life which Don Juan leads. We have, then, three characters furnishing the background of religious and social belief against which Don Juan's conduct appears in sharp contrast. The effect upon that conduct of the combined corrective influences is a change in his tactics which, while apparently carrying on his character, is in fact radically new, and overthrows his claim to consistency of wickedness.

From that point of view which refuses to allow the possibility of divine intervention in sublunary human affairs, the play is thoroughly immoral; the hero progresses from stage to stage of villainy, uncontrolled by social forces of any sort, and the playwright is compelled to an undignified appeal to supernatural power in order to stop him in his course. The immorality appears the greater in that Don Juan is a natural character, one whose possibility far more people would admit than could believe in a convenient thunderbolt to dispose of him. We find ourselves in a frightful land where the dragon is possible—indeed, where he is busily engaged in laying waste our countryside and devouring our womenfolk—while we cannot believe in a St. George to show us a divine judgment. The outlook is bad for mankind if there is no sure punishment for the complete scoundrel. Why, then, does the dramatist introduce the marvelous—lugged in as it were by the ears to save a play which is otherwise filled with examples of the naturalistic convention? This brings up the question of the provenance of the play and the influence upon its structure of other elements than that of original invention.

Schröder's work¹ elaborates a schema of the relationship of Molière's play to the earlier dramas of the *Don Juan* type. It is

¹ "Die dramatischen Bearbeitungen der Don Juan-Sage in Spanien, Italien und Frankreich bis auf Molière einschliesslich," Beiheft zur *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, 36. Heft, Halle (Max Niemeyer), 1912, p. 203.

impossible here to offer an outline of his process, but his conclusions, which develop and incorporate those of Gendarme de Bévotte,¹ present as the immediate sources of Molière's material:

1. A redaction of *El burlador de Sevilla* by Tirso de Molina, appearing in 1630, ten years after the original.

2. A play entitled *Le Festin de Pierre*, which Villiers in 1659 arranged from an Italian work in turn composed in 1652 by Gilberto from (a) an early Italian translation of the *Burlador*, plus (b) the work (before 1650) of another Italian, Cicognini.

3. Another *Festin de Pierre*, put together in 1658 by Dorimon out of (a) the Spanish redaction of the *Burlador*, plus (b) Cicognini's work—by way of a *commedia dell'arte* dating from 1657, plus (c) Gilberto's work. (Incidentally, Villiers is thought to have plagiarized from Dorimon, but in such genealogies as this it's a wise child that knows its own father.)

4. An Italian play of some time between 1600 and 1620, entitled *L'ateista fulminato*, traces of which appear in the *Burlador*, and on which also Cicognini and Gilberto had drawn to some degree.

5. That *commedia dell'arte* which Dorimon had used.

Now the general structure of his play Molière found prescribed for him; and particularly the catastrophe at the end, which is far more consonant with the elevated and romantic spirit of the Spanish original—or for that matter with the frankly comic Italian spirit—than with the naturalism of Molière's own conception. But despite the changed convention under which Molière was writing, he could not drop the chief incident of the well-known general plot; and the descent of Don Juan into hell remains to disturb the consistency of the atmosphere pervading the new play.

Now to return to the subject of the background against which the character of Don Juan appears; a distinction must be made between the social opinion described in the play—a composite of devoutness, family pride, and *bon sens*—and the social opinion to which Molière was actually addressing himself: the opinion of the court and of the people of Paris.

We need not look with Michelet² (*Histoire de la France; Louis XIV et la révocation de l'Édit de Nantes*, chap. v), with Schweitzer

¹ *Op. cit.*

² For these and other references cf. Gendarme de Bévotte, *op. cit.*, pp. 180, 181.

(*Molière und seine Bühne*), nor with Gazier (*Mélanges de littérature et d'Histoire*) for a living breathing original of the character which Molière gives Don Juan; but we may trace the composite portrait of many folk of the time. The movement of the *libertins*, which followed the intellectual and moral emancipation of the Renaissance from Italy to France, had developed highly at the French court by the middle of the seventeenth century, and had educed as an offshoot the purely selfish and non-philosophic group of skeptics, who enjoyed the license of behavior sanctioned by the new dispensation without concerning themselves about its theories. The result was a gangrene of society for which even Louis XIV felt obliged in time to attempt a remedy; Gendarme de Béville¹ cites the outrageous disregard of religion and morals shown by Henri de Lorraine, La Peyrère, Retz, Brissac, Manicamp, Guiche, Bussy, De Roquelaure, and other ornaments of the court. At the same time there developed, partly as a counterblast to the increasing license of the period, a revival of religious practice which eventually proclaimed itself as far removed as libertinism from the *juste milieu* wherein Molière put his social faith. As the *libertins* claimed the sanction of nature for their refusal of all control, so the *dévots*² at the other pole both fulminated against even normal freedom of manner and at the same time gained apparent proselytes whose one end was the concealment of their conduct. Molière's work succeeds in gibbeting before his audience at once the out-and-out *debauchés* of his time and the narrow and fanatical converts, sincere or no, to the movement which arose with Jansenism. So this society with its two factions was present to Molière's mind during the period of hasty adaptation which resulted in *Don Juan*, as it had been when he aroused a wasp's nest by his presentation of *Tartuffe*. *Don Juan* takes the aspect of a gallant return to an attack which has been at first repulsed, in the general campaign aroused by the *École des femmes* and long maintained by the *précieuses*, the *marquis*, and the rather motley crew of companion sufferers from the playwright's wit. Both *Tartuffe* and *Don Juan*, by the way, belong to a time when Louis favored Molière

¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 185, n. 2, 192-93.

² Cf. R. Allier, *La cabale des dévots 1627-1666*, Paris (Armand Colin), 1902; chaps. xvi-xix especially.

and was in ill humor with the *dévots* and (to a lesser degree to be sure) with the *libertins*. But the chief point here to be emphasized is really double: in the first place, the general conviction of the *honnêtes gens*, of whom the dramatist stands as the champion; in the second, the tenets and examples of a society actually living and powerful in the court of the period, and uniting the extremes of license and bigotry.

III

The structure and technique of the play present the peculiarities to be expected from the manner of its composition; Molière has laid four authors under contribution toward the work, and has taken all imaginable liberties with the order of incidents and with the characters set forth by his predecessors. These changes frequently add nothing to the progress of the plot, but obscure and perplex the reader's mind; why should the scene of Don Juan's gallant rescue of Don Carlos, and his courageous admission of his identity in the presence of an overwhelming force follow directly the incident with the poor recluse, which proved so damaging to Don Juan's self-esteem? Why, again, have we the sequence of the first meeting with the statue, the comic scene with M. Dimanche, and the interview with Don Louis? Why does Elvire so suddenly reappear to urge repentance on her betrayer—an enterprise which has no effect on the development of the play? Why, moreover, do the acts take place: first in a palace, no explanation being made of this place as against a travelers' lodging, more natural for a man on his way from home on an adventure; next in a countryside near the sea; next, without expressed reason, in that very forest where the Commandeur's tomb stands; next in Don Juan's own home, where Elvire, somehow apprised of his return, comes to plead with him; next, and last, in the country again, where there appear with remarkable unanimity Don Juan's father, then Don Carlos, then the specter, and finally the statue? Unity of place has gone by the board; unity of time has suffered severely, at least a day and a half elapsing from beginning to end of the play; and the strictest remodeling could hardly give unity of action to such a potpourri as this adaptation from the works of three countries and some ten interdependent authors.

Another noteworthy point is the sudden change in tone manifested at the end of the third act. The naturalistic convention has been carried through the play to the point where the statue nods; the illusion that has been built up now disappears, and we have neither the high emotional-religious tone of the Spanish sources nor the frankly comic atmosphere of the Italians, nor again the tragic approached by Dorimon and Villiers. The play appears a hodge-podge, and the reader's mind falls into confusion.

But through this conglomerate of *comédie bouffe*, comedy of manners, comedy of character, and religious drama there develops a strong and unifying principle: the character of the hero disengages itself from incident after incident as steadily as the situation of a Greek tragedy. It appears in fact rather to dominate the circumstances through which it is carried in the play than to be affected by them. And in this connection a rather interesting question may be raised: as to whether *Don Juan* is not better to be judged as a novel than as a play.

Drama and novel alike concern the interaction of character and environment, in the full sense of the total of exterior influences operating upon character; now the necessities of play production require that the course of time during which the hero's character is concerned be condensed in representation, and that dramatic "situation" be emphasized in this condensing process. There are therefore in a play a limited number of points at which the tension of character against environment is drawn to its height; so that situation seems to dominate character to a greater degree than in the novel, wherein the character, being the element of continuity in a long and relatively complex series of situations which are therefore relatively unimportant, appears by its unifying quality to dominate the circumstances through which it passes. Now in *Don Juan* the structural importance of situation as such is small: Elvire's interview with Don Juan in the first act fails of the poignancy which it would have if there were any trace on the part of the hero of spiritual weakening or struggle; the scene as it turns out is no more than a single exhibit in the demonstration of what Don Juan's character has come to be. The affair with the unfortunate Pierrot and the two country girls is scarcely more than a bucolic interlude whose humorous aspect almost over-

shadows its expository value. The refusal of the recluse to swear for Don Juan's bidding raises the current of the play to the dignity of a situation; but it has no *suite* in the actions or the expressed sentiments of the hero. The discovery by Don Carlos of the fact that his rescuer is the very man whom he has been pursuing has the elements of situation; but it is not given the prominence in the play that it might have received if Molière had had more time to weld and shape his heterogeneous material. The conversations of Don Juan and Don Louis do not raise the tension of the play to any great degree; in the first Don Juan is quite unmoved throughout (and we know too little of Don Louis to feel that he is anything more to the play than the traditional "heavy father"), while in the second the father passes out of the play without affecting it further in any respect. The visit of Elvire has no link whatever with the rest of the play; and the scenes with the statue, which can be accepted at all only if the reader has become quite reconciled to the intruded supernatural, cannot properly claim the status of situations. We have therefore numerous incidents of which scarcely one can be elevated to the dignity of a full dramatic situation; they are all however significant episodes whereby the character of the hero makes itself clearer, and wherein it manifestly controls the action. It is possible thus to trace a novelistic technique in the work whose complex origins rendered the task of dramatic *remaniement* so arduous. Thus considered, the structural defects of the play—which are indeed to such an extent the heritage from Molière's predecessors—drop into insignificance, while the play itself manifests an artistic unity of no mean value. Out of chaos there arises the living figure of Don Juan.

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